



## The future of private veterinary practice in South Africa

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### ROOTS

Private practice became the major vocation of local veterinarians from about 1945. Soga was probably the first qualified South African veterinarian to practice privately on a limited scale in the 1800s. Jack Boswell was the first locally qualified (in 1934) veterinarian to go directly into practice without first working for the government and is regarded as the father of private practice in South Africa. Boet Bekker worked for the government before setting up a successful practice in 1935.

### PREDICTING THE FUTURE

Every day, millions of people read their horoscope in the hope that it might offer guidance for the future of their lives. But lacking the use of tea leaves or a crystal ball, all that I can say is if one reads the press and popular publications and takes yourself out of the box, one begins to see and understand the bigger picture of veterinary science moving on to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The biggest impact that causes an industry to change usually comes from outside the industry and such changes are also going to impact on veterinary science in the future. Therefore, one should constantly look over one's shoulder to see who might be creating something new that could change veterinary practice, and then stay one step ahead to survive.

I believe that veterinarians have without question the most honorable and most wonderful profession that exists on the planet. The range and diversity of the profession is such that a veterinarian can branch out into many sectors of veterinary science and there will always be a lot of willing takers of these

services should there be an economic advantage if one should apply them. I am sure the future on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is so bright for veterinarians that they are going to have to wear sun glasses.

### CHALLENGES FACING US TODAY

Before we look too far into the future of veterinary science, we should look at the biggest challenge that faces us as veterinarians, which is for a permanent solution to the veterinary workforce shortfall in South Africa. The starting point to succeed can be found in four areas: recruitment, selection, education and retention. The veterinary workforce shortfall is a multi-faceted problem and I don't claim to have all the answers. I think Onderstepoort realizes the magnitude of the problem and is trying to do something about it. There are, however, some things that each and every veterinarian can do to help. Become a gatherer, recruiter and mentor for young people interested in what you are doing as a veterinarian. Whether you are employed in state or provincial services, private practice, industry, academy or research, you can impact on someone's life dramatically. I had a very good veterinary education but learnt all of bovine medicine, reproduction and nutrition from mentors, all of whom excelled in their own fields. There is just so much that veterinary education can do to prepare students for their career path—the rest is up to the student and the mentor. I therefore see that we as veterinarians will have to play a vital role in education and early mentorship in the future if we wish to stem the tide of ever decreasing numbers of rural practitioners and intend to set the demographic representation of the veterinary workforce on a new course.

If veterinarians wish to pass the life boat test, the faculty needs to make graduating veterinarians more relevant to society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the needs of the veterinary profession is severely imbalanced with more than 75 % of qualifying veterinarians ending up in companion animal practice. This makes the present day delivery of veterinary services, though essential for companion animals, a luxury item that loses its support base in a strained society that is ever increasingly monitoring animal welfare and food security.

I don't think one can overplay the mystique of James Herriot and we should remind ourselves that is why we do what we do and solutions to the veterinary workforce must start with us, the roll players in veterinary science. Remember, 'all politics are local'.

## **FUTURE CHALLENGES**

The fundamentals of veterinary science are changing and veterinarians should prepare themselves for change. There is a shift from a national market that is commodity-focused to a global market which is much more value-added and niche-market focused. Because most of the world's population growth will take place in developing countries, the global demand for meat is projected to increase by 60% by 2020.

The second change is from emphasis on production increases to one on social acceptance of meat products. Consumers have concerns about animal welfare and environmental issues, and they are becoming more interested in organically produced foods. Veterinarians should be mindful that animal agriculturists, who have had a privileged status in the past, now have a lesser status caused by a public increasingly out of touch with agriculture (milk out of the bottle, etc.).

A further shift is envisioning food as a health promoter, and not just for sustenance. Scientific advances in the field of transgenic animals will usher in a new area in which animal products may be used exclusively as medicines and for preventative treatments. These products will involve intense efforts to educate the public as to their merit. Finally, rural veterinarians will be perceived as public advocates. Veterinarians should be seen as protectors against zoonotic outbreaks as well as agri-terrorism attacks.

All these changes will require the reinventing of the 21<sup>st</sup> century veterinarian. 'When you are on a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount.' The solu-

tion is not to continue on the treadmill of producing meat faster and faster. Step back and reassess your personal and professional pathway into the future.

Veterinarians can add value for their clients and expand professional capabilities by acquiring new skills and becoming involved in new activities. These include, to name a few, becoming an animal welfare advisor, food safety expert, bio-security planner, population health expert, participating in the management of the ecosystem for sustainable use, in the maintenance of wildlife health and a greater involvement in biomedical research, and acting as a public health advocate. Veterinarians need to focus on improving communications skills, partnering with government agencies and departments, conducting environmental scans of their entire commodity chain and training and teaching producers.

I am not here to give all the answers, but will suggest that the future is catching up with us veterinarians and there is an urgency to address the future and keep looking over your shoulder, for the future we will live in tomorrow is created by actions we take today.

In the socio-political environment private veterinarians will have to play a vital roll in addressing the unique issues within South Africa. I envisage that private veterinarians will be pivotal in delivering a service on behalf of the government with the aid of animal health technicians and primary health workers. The days of private veterinarians working in isolation are rapidly coming to an end and they need to build coalitions with state veterinary services, other professions as well as with the food animal industry as a whole.

As we move on into the new millennium, we are truly at the crossroad of the private veterinarian's history. Primary health care, new economic models, political pressure to become more relevant to agri-economic environment, economic viability of the private practitioner and technological challenges have brought both opportunities and despair to the private practitioner.

Studies have shown that the continuing convergence of animal health, human health and ecosystem health is the new reality, and that the concept of one medicine should be embraced with the veterinarian playing a pivotal role, as almost every human disease can be caused, modified or altered by environmental agents. This has been clearly shown in the case of TB, HIV, monkey pox, avian influenza, etc. Seventy-five percent of diseases that have

emerged in the past 25 years are zoonotic in nature.

The concept of *one world, one health, one medicine*, should be embraced by the veterinary profession in the future.

The future is what we make of it and we need to adapt or die. By embracing new technology and keeping ahead of the pack, the private practitioner in South Africa will have a rosy future, so veterinarians need to go out and get those dark glasses.